

Urban Mobility and the History of Cinema-Going in Chennai

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From the early years of the 20th century the introduction of new forms of transportation coincided with the beginnings of cinema in Chennai. The emergent transportation networks helped to set the coordinates for film-going within the urban geography of Chennai and, in so doing, directly linked the experience of cinema with that of the city around it. This essay addresses a series of questions about how urban mobility relates to the early history of cinema-going. How did early audiences get to the cinema theatre? To what extent did cinema halls rely upon public transportation to bring in their audiences? In what ways did new forms of transport contribute to the history of film-going?

The cinema created a common movement of people through urban space. As cinema houses became conspicuous destinations within the urban geography, they ordered the movement of people to and from their specific locations, through regular schedules of opening and closing times and through ticket sales. As cinema audiences came and went they created directional flows as one crowd gathered and another dispersed, creating a kind of physical mingling, a jostling of bodies moving at cross-purposes. The sites of cinema exhibition provided a focal point of urban action, around which there was steady movement of people and crowds coming, going, congregating, lingering, and loitering. Cinema halls were dense transfer points within the urban landscape. They programmed the movement of people and traffic wherever and whenever film shows were screened.

Cinema theatres linked up with the wider city through transport. Transport allowed for the physical movement of audiences to and from the cinema. There were many different ways to go to the cinema and all of these would have varied in terms of duration, distance, mode of transport, and itinerary. Depending on whether one travelled on foot, by rickshaw, riding in a horse cart, tram, bus, or car, going to the cinema also meant having to navigate one's way through the city. In this sense, the very movement through the urban landscape of Chennai and the experience of streets, buildings, crowds, traffic, and sounds that went with it, merged as part of a trip to the cinema. From the perspective of someone going to the cinema, the urban journeys before and after the event inevitably framed the experience of films within the everyday rhythms of urban life.



Esplanade, Madras (no publisher identification). This photograph, dating to about 1910, shows how tramlines dominated even the widest of Chennai streets. Author's personal collection.

PARALLEL TRACKS

The development of public transportation roughly coincided with the growth and success of cinema exhibition. This relationship can be traced back to the end of the 19th century when cinema and tramways were introduced within years of each other. Both appeared in the public spaces of Madras as conspicuous signs of a colonial modernity. Both were based on new mechanical and electric technologies of movement, involved considerable capital investment, and were run through ticket sales as a commercial enterprise. Further, public transportation and cinema halls both opened up and institutionalized new kinds of public space, which allowed for greater mixing at close proximity among those of different castes, classes, and religious communities that would otherwise not normally interact.¹ As such, both created, shaped, and sustained movement through the city; they opened new pathways and also worked the already well-trodden routes in the complex networks of spatial order imposed by the colonial administration, commerce, labour, residence, religion, education, and leisure.

The history of transportation in Chennai is, of course, much older than that of the cinema and cannot be fully addressed in this essay. The point I want to stress here is that, well before the cinema, transportation played an important part in the making of Chennai as a single place. With the old colonial seat of power, Fort St George, at the centre, Madras was built up in the 1800s around three main concentrations – George Town, Triplicane (including Chindatripet), and then to the west with New Town, Vepery, and Purasawakkam. It also expanded geographically by incorporating surrounding villages into a sprawling decentralized, low-density conglomeration of suburbs. The overall effect was the development of three congested and distinctly urban areas within a city that was a somewhat random, fortuitous collection of villages rather than an integrated and centralized whole. The spread outwards was to a great extent encouraged by the movement of Europeans into garden homes in the periphery on previously cultivated land. These areas were generally interspersed

between and cut off from the older Indian villages. By the turn of the century most of the British residents were widely scattered in spacious residential garden suburbs (Egmore, Chetpet, Kilpauk, Nungambakkam, Teynampet, and Adyar). This left the most congested urban areas of the city for Indian residents. In 1900 two-thirds of the population lived in one-fifth of the total land area.² Outside of these congested areas the rest of the city seemed almost rural.

With its history of decentralized urban growth, transportation has always been of particular importance in Chennai. Prior to the development of mechanized forms of transport, Chennai residents mainly relied upon the rickshaw, the *jutka*, and the horse carriage. The rickshaws were small hand-pulled, two-wheeled carts fitted with a seat. Many families owned private rickshaws, but the vast majority of rickshaws were available for public hire. The *jutka* was also a two-wheeled, covered cart fitted with a bench or benches but was usually pulled by a pony (or sometimes by bullocks). Four-wheeled horse carriages (landau type) were the most common form of transport of the colonial elite until the early decades of the 20th century.³ In Madras, the private ownership of a means of transportation was always a privilege of the wealthy elite, especially for those living in the suburbs. The majority of Indian residents who lived closer to the urban centres would have been less likely to own transport, but would have probably been able to walk to most places. Owning or having easy access to transportation held the possibility of experiencing Madras as a spacious city of great distances.⁴ In the words of one British visitor, who described Madras as a city of suburbs, "You can drive out six miles one way for a garden party and three the other way to dinner."⁵

Into this social hierarchy of transport practices on the streets of Madras, the electric tramway introduced the first mechanized form of public transportation. The Madras Electric Tramway Company Limited received official authorization from the Madras Government in 1892. Tracks were laid in 1894 and, though there are conflicting accounts on this, trams were probably also opened for at least some limited public use the same year. The trams were a matter of considerable civic pride as they were the first of their kind in all of British India and only the second in Asia after Bangkok's trams started in 1893. The first tramline in Madras used an underground conduit system to supply electricity – which proved too vulnerable to flooding during a destructive monsoon season in 1895 when the fledgling tramline was destroyed. The electric tram reopened on May 7, 1895 with a single line powered by an overhead wire system.⁶ New tracks were laid and operations expanded in 1904 when the business was reorganized as part of a new company called the Madras Electric Tramways (1904) Ltd., which ran until 1953 when bankruptcy forced its closure.

The tramway gained an immediate presence in the urban landscape. Already in 1900 a British traveller described the popularity of the trams in strong terms: "The native enjoys cheap, rather rapid and very crowded transport, such as he loves, in electric tramcars."⁷ Over the first decade of the 20th century, the tramway consolidated its place in Madras by continuing to add new tramcars and to extend its lines into the suburban periphery. Tramlines not only connected the three main urban centres, but also linked them with the dispersed suburban residential sprawl. By connecting up its constituent parts with a common and habitual movement of people, the tram helped to articulate the city as one publicly shared place like never before. By 1914 Madras electric tramway cars ran at frequent intervals to nearly every part of the city. There was a ten-minute service between Egmore station and the Custom House on Beach Road, which passed through some of the busiest commercial streets of George Town. There were also branch lines, which conveyed

passengers to and from all of the most important urban neighbourhoods – Royapuram, Chindatripet, Mount Road, Royapettah, San Thome, Triplicane, Purasawakkam, Washermanpet, Mylapore, and other suburban areas.⁸

Trams not only helped physically to integrate the city through networks of movement, they also brought the people of Madras together in new ways. As a mode of public transport trams opened up a new kind of public space that allowed for new social relations across race, caste, class, and religious lines. The tramcar was a new, shared experience, which challenged established social boundaries while creating its own particular form of public space. The introduction of the railway and trams thus created contentious sites of interaction and confrontation between brahmins, non-brahmins and Adi-Dravidas. One such early conflict flared up around the appointment of several Pariah conductors during 1908. This met with protest from orthodox communities, who managed to convince the Company to sack their low-caste conductors and replace them with employees from other castes.⁹

As the Madras tram continued to carve out and expand the pathways of urban movement, the social experience of this form of transport also became normalized as part of urban living. A 1933 article, which offered a series of lighthearted and humorous reflections about tramcars in Madras, described more amicable and self-consciously democratic social relations. "We, the residents of Madras, who use the tram are conscious democrats and we glory in our democratic sense."¹⁰ This



Salt Cotaurs (formerly the tram shed), Elephant Gate Bridge Road, Choolai.



Triplicane High Road (Publishers: Weile & Klein, Madras). Dating to about 1905, this photograph shows the tramlines running through a now unrecognizable suburban Triplicane setting. Author's personal collection.

democratic experience was described in terms of having the conductors "wipe dirt on" passengers when punching their ticket. Note that it was assumed here that the conductors were usually of a lower social and economic status than the more middle-class tram passengers and this was considered a key component of tramcar democracy. Yet more than just coming into contact with the "great unwashed", the article then narrated a much more complex social encounter to illustrate a simple kind of push-and-shove democracy of tramcar passengers:

When old Fakruddin, the seller of paper toys with a trail of snuff on his long beard, looked for a seat, the orthodox Brahmin Aravamudayyengar, with a dozen marks in white and red all over his body, protested there was no more room for a seventh, when six were already seated on the bench. But Fakruddin was persistent and wedged himself between the Brahmin and his neighbour. Now the Brahmin thought it prudent to show himself reconciled to the situation. Dhanakoti Mudaliar then made the wise remark, "If you can spare room in your heart, there is no difficulty in sparing room outside."¹¹

Though this is a fictionalized account, it nonetheless highlighted the experience of the Madras tramway as one characterized by increased and random social interactions between different castes, religious communities, and classes. In this sense the trams of Madras were seen as emblematic of a new urban social scene where older social divisions and hierarchies suddenly seemed refigured and confused. As the tramway cut new spatial pathways and channelled people through the city, it also became a key part of a new urban public life.

CINEMA AS A DESTINATION

During the early years of the tramway service, the technology of moving pictures was also introduced in Madras. In the last years of the 19th century touring film companies first brought the cinema to the city. A pattern of short and sporadic visits by travelling cinema shows continued through the first decade of the 20th century. These early engagements, which largely catered to the colonial elite, were held at

already existing public halls, like the Victoria Public Hall, or would take place in tents set up in the open fields along the Esplanade, which were also frequented by circuses, Indian drama companies, and grazing animals. The transitory character of early exhibition meant that the cinema had to fit into already existing places of public entertainment and did not stay long enough to mark its own city space.

Institutions of cinema exhibition only managed to establish a permanent and continuous place in the city from 1913. Within six months of each other the first cinema halls, the Empire Cinema and the Electric Theatre, opened on Mount Road. Even though these first permanent establishments only lasted a couple of years, three new cinema halls quickly replaced them, built over the span of four years during the First World War – the Gaiety in 1914, the Elphinstone in 1915, and the Wellington in 1918. These buildings established a significant physical presence for cinema materially built into the city's landscape. They marked this Mount Road neighbourhood from the outset as the most prestigious site of cinema exhibition in all of south India.

In addition to the Mount Road area, new sites of cinema exhibition also opened in the most heavily urbanized parts of the city – George Town, Vepery, and Triplicane – which catered to a vast majority of Indian audiences. The first cinema outside of the Mount Road triangle, the Crown Theatre on Mint Street in George Town, opened in 1916. The Globe Theatre on Purasawakkam Road in Vepery followed quickly in 1917. In 1920 the Empire Cinema (now Minerva) opened on Davidson Street immediately next to Broadway in George Town. In 1924 two more cinema halls opened with Cinema Majestic on St Xavier's Street in George Town (now Murugan Talkies) and Imperial Cinema on Triplicane High Road (now Star Talkies). And then in three consecutive years at the end of the decade three new cinema halls opened in George Town – the Liberty (now Select) in 1927, Kinema Central in Soundarya Hall, Govindappa Naiken

Street in 1928, and the National Picture Palace (now Broadway Talkies) started in 1929. By 1930 Madras cinema halls reached twelve in number for a city with a population of 647,000.

CINEMA JOURNEYS

We can discern at least three main types of journeys to early Chennai cinemas according to the distance travelled. Walking was, during the first part of the 20th century, the most common way for people to get around the city. Many people were accustomed to walking long distances frequently and habitually. It seems likely that a large portion of early film audiences made local journeys to cinemas on foot. Some travelled from other neighbourhoods across town via an increasing number of both public and private transport options. And still others saw the cinema as part of a visit to the city from out of town. These three kinds of journeys – local, trans-metro, and from out of town – correspond to



Broadway Talkies, Prakasam Road (Popham's Broadway), George Town.



Roxy Cinema, now an exhibition hall, Purasawakkam High Road.

different modes of urban mobility each with specific transportation requirements and entailing very different experience and engagement with city life. Further, we can use these three possible journeys to differentiate Chennai cinemas according to from where and how far their audiences typically travelled. Depending upon their location within the urban geography and cultural hierarchy, the early cinema theatres of Chennai were varied in their abilities to attract audiences from their immediate locality, from other parts of Chennai, and from out of town.

All cinema halls would have to various degrees attracted people from all over, but some were more local than others. Perhaps the best example of a local cinema is that of the Liberty Theatre. Tucked away on Thathamuthiappan Street, a small side street in George Town, this cinema hall has always been a rather close neighbourhood affair. Because of the narrowness and congestion of the street, there is little or no room for vehicles to move or park. The Liberty has no outdoor compound to accommodate crowds or vehicles; instead there is an interior lobby with box office, which opens directly on to the street. A very large percentage of the Liberty's audience would have been from around the locality, and would have walked to the cinema.

At the other end of the spectrum were the cinemas on Mount Road, which were much more successful in attracting trans-metro and out-of-town audiences. As the number of Madras cinema theatres increased during the 1920s, those on Mount Road came to be further distinguished as the first-run cinema houses in the city. As first-run theatres they were the first to screen the newest and best films. Madan Theatres was running the Elphinstone, when they described a first-run cinema hall in India as one "in a good location which has a large seating capacity and in a well appointed place where entertainment can be accomplished by elaborate musical programmes and other attractive arrangements."¹² The Mount Road cinemas used their premier (and premiere) status to draw audiences from all parts of Chennai and beyond.

Of the three kinds of journey outlined above, the electric tramway was a key



Mount Road (no publisher identification). The photograph, taken around 1905, portrays the evening traffic on Mount Road at the major intersection with Blacker's and Wallajah Roads.

Author's personal collection.

form of trans-metro travel, which to some extent must have enabled Chennai cinemas to attract audiences from all parts of the city. It cannot be an accident of chance that all early cinema halls in Chennai were located along or near tramlines. The physical proximity of cinemas to the tramlines provides one clue that trams enabled film-going. We will never get figures for who and how many travelled to the cinema by tram, but we do know that as early as 1921 trams and cinema attendance were being linked in the English press in Chennai. In the weekly cinema page of the *Madras Mail*, the film correspondent repeatedly claimed that there was a direct relationship between the tramways and cinema attendance. Take for example:

Madras cinemas have had their full share of troubles of late. In the first place they were badly hit by the tramway workers' strike, which made it impossible for many of their patrons to attend the Shows. Instead of full attendance, especially as regards the cheaper seats the managements have found themselves confronted with half empty houses and the consequent decrease in their weekly incomes ha[s] been considerable.¹³

Given the British colonial anti-labour slant of the paper, it is easy to read the paper's editorial line against the strike into this passage. Even so, there must have been some obvious relation between the tramway and cinema attendance for it to be used as part of an argument against the strike. Embedded in the passage is the assumption that already in 1921 the tramway was facilitating and channelling the growth of film-going in Chennai.

CHENNAI MOVES ON

The tramway was, of course, only one part of a much larger story of how transportation and cinema related to the urban development of Chennai. The tram was the first – and through the 1930s also the most important – form of urban public transport in Chennai. However, other forms of both public and privately owned conveyance increasingly offered alternative means for going to the cinema. In



General Hospital Road near Moore Market (Publishers: Klein & Peyerl, Madras). This photograph depicts a waiting crowd at a tram stop during the 1920s on what is now known as Poonamalee High Road.

Author's personal collection.

particular, motorbus services, which started to appear on the streets of Chennai from the mid-1920s, made transport more affordable to even lower-income groups and reached parts of Chennai poorly served by the trams. The 1931 Census Report cited public transportation for the first time as a major determining factor in the growth of Chennai. The still recent advent of the bus was singled out as having greatly contributed to encouraging people to settle more freely on the city margins. This applied particularly to the more industrial areas of north Madras, which had been ill served with cheap communications before the advent of the bus.¹⁴ Ransom writing in 1938 claimed that "the tramways were used by large numbers of people", but that they were also inadequate to serve the needs of a city which had by then spread far beyond the range of the tram system. Further, he wondered whether tramcars were even a suitable form of public transport given that in certain sections of the city the streets were inconveniently and often dangerously narrow.¹⁵ Other transport alternatives were making the tram only one among other possible options.

The story of transport and cinema in the making of Chennai continues with the electrification of a commuter rail line for 29 kilometres to the south of the city in the 1930s, increased automobile traffic and parking issues in the 1940s, and the rise of bicycles from the 1950s. Transportation and cinema continue to coincide and overlap as part of the urban history of Chennai. When you think of film-going in terms of mobility, the cinema is linked up through urban journeys to larger spatial coordinates of Chennai. The cinema for its part, gave people reason to set out through the city; it gave them a place to go. Every film show at every cinema entailed hundreds of journeys near and far with film-goers spanning out in all directions blending in with the general habits and patterns of everyday urban mobility. The success of the cinema in Chennai must, among other things, be understood in relation to the increasing and new possibilities of urban mobility.

NOTES

¹ On this point see K. Sivathamby, *The Tamil Film as Medium of Political Communication*, Madras, 1981, pp. 18–19; and S.V. Srinivas, "Gandhian Nationalism and Melodrama in the 30's Telugu Cinema", *Journal of the Moving Image*, no. 1, Autumn, 1999, pp. 14–36. Both authors have argued that in the context of other south Indian performance arts the cinema was the first social equalizer.

² G. Kurien, "The Distribution of Population in the City of Madras", *The Indian Geographical Journal*, vol. 16, no. 1, January–March 1941, pp. 58–70.

³ C.W. Ransom, *A City in Transition: Studies in the Social Life of Madras*, Madras, 1938, pp. 16–17.

⁴ G. Barlow, *The Story of Madras*, London, 1921.

⁵ G.W. Steevens, *In India*, London, 1900, p. 299.

⁶ *The Hindu*, April 13, 1953.

⁷ Steevens, *In India*, p. 300.

⁸ Somerset Playne, *Southern India: Its History, People, Commerce and Industrial Resources*, London, 1914–15, p. 122.

⁹ *Tamilan*, March 4, 1908, p. 52. Cited in V. Geetha and S. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyottee Thass to Periyar*, Calcutta, 1998, p. 52.

¹⁰ P.R. Krishnaswami, "The Wonders of Madras: the Tram Car", *The Merry Magazine*, vol. 1, no. 4, February 25, 1933.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Evidence of the Indian Cinematograph Committee, 1927–1928*, vol. 5, New Delhi, 1928, p. 830.

¹³ *Madras Mail*, February 19, 1921; also see February 12, 1921.

¹⁴ J.C. Molony, *City of Madras, Census Statistical Tables*, Madras, 1931.

¹⁵ Ransom, *A City in Transition* ..., p. 17.